THE

RECONSTRUCTIONIST

DEDICATED TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF JUDAISM AS A RELIGIOUS CIVILIZATION, TO THE UPBUILDING OF ISRAEL'S ANCIENT HOMELAND, AND TO THE FURTHERANCE OF UNIVERSAL FREEDOM, JUSTICE AND PEACE.

Vol. II. November 27, 1936 Kislev 13, 5697 No. 15

EDITORIALS

THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST SYMPOSIUM

MAKING THE UNITED STATES SAFE FOR DEMOCRACY

APPRECIATING OUR JEWISH MUSICIANS

HADASSAH'S OPPORTUNITY
ON RAISING THE STATUS OF THE RABBINATE

BIRO-BIDJAN AND THE JEWISH FUTURE
By Robert Gordis

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EDITORIALS

The Reconstructionist Symposium

ON Sunday evening, November 15, in New York City, a Reconstructionist Symposium was held, at which the subject, "Implementing Reconstructionism," was discussed by outstanding leaders in four sectors of Jewish life, education, social service, student activity and the laity. Despite the inclement weather, two hundred readers of *The Reconstructionist* attended. The discussion which followed the addresses was particularly interesting to those present who take seriously the future of the Reconstructionist program.

The basic problem was articulated by Mordecai M. Kaplan, who presided. He pointed out that the advocates of Reconstructionism must decide whether the philosophy and program which they espouse is to lead to the formation of a new movement, or organization, or whether they are to make for the creation of a unique and constructive "school of thought." The former course of action would necessarily involve the establishment of an organizational structure, a concrete program of material support, and all the practical machinery of expansion. The latter would involve the broader dissemination of literary efforts, and the creation of additional literary materials for the elucidation and elaboration of the Reconstructionist philosophy.

Undoubtedly there are good arguments for pursuing either of these alternative plans, and there are certainly many good arguments that might be offered which could indicate the weakness of either suggestion. For the creation of an organizational structure it might be said that only through militant organization can any program be carried out. The present leadership in Zionism, education, philanthropy, and religion will not easily abdicate. The only logical procedure is to supplant that leadership by creating competitive and more cogently conceived institutions and movements. Against this method, the argument might be advanced that Jewish life today is sufficiently provided with organizations, and that competitive organizations would lead to further chaos, or would lay Reconstructionism open to the charge of needlessly adding to the multiplicity of existing groups.

For the "school of thought" program, the argument might be offered that the best results can be accomplished by influencing those who are now at the head of existing and functioning bodies. Since they are responsible for the success of these bodies of Jews, they will be amenable to any constructive program which is based on realistic thinking. The success of Jewish enterprises in America has not been so dazzling that their leaders will not welcome an integrated philosophy and an implemented program. On the other

hand, the "school of thought" attitude suffers from a serious weakness. The natural tendency of all leadership, one which follows the path of least resistance, is to maintain the status quo so long as no *immediate* crisis threatens. Those who are at the helm of Jewish affairs today deprecate the value of a "philosophy"; they are not eager to channelize their fluid and diffuse activities into a clearly formulated direction, guided by a thoroughly thought-out plan. A "school of thought," therefore, would make little impression upon them.

Such, briefly, are the arguments on either side. They are not carefully canvassed at this time, nor would this be the place to enter into a detailed analysis of their respective merits. But we feel that before very long a definite policy will have to be decided upon, and relentlessly pursued. For that reason, the readers of *The Reconstructionist* are hereby invited and urged to make known, through the columns of this magazine, their opinions on this vital matter. Letters to the editors on the subject of the future of Reconstructionism will be gladly published. At the same time, readers in various parts of the United States are urged to conduct similar symposia from time to time, calling upon significant individuals, who are known to sympathize with our point of view, to address these symposia. The more thought given to the problems of Jewish life, the greater the possibility that the authentic road will ultimately be chosen.

Make the United States Safe For Democracy

THE sweeping re-election of Franklin D. Roosevelt to the presidency has been rightly hailed as a triumph for democracy. The overwhelming majority given to the successful candidate is certainly a vindication of the common sense of the people, yet one wonders how much of the triumph was democracy's and how much Roosevelt's personal triumph. One shudders to think how another man, not so consummate a politician, not so charming a personality, not so gifted a speaker, would have fared in face of the powerful and sinister forces arrayed against him. For opposed to him were the titans of entrenched wealth, who with huge funds at their command, resorted to treachery and deceit, to vilification and slander, in order to defeat the object of their hatred. And opposed to him were eighty-five percent of the newspapers of the country.

In the heat of the battle, the role of the press received but scant notice. The press has always been looked upon as one of the cornerstones of democracy, as the fourth-estate. People have pointed to it with pride as one of the most valiant of our defenders of freedom and a guarantor of democracy. But unfortunately they have given scant attention and little thought to newspapers in recent years; as a result, the character of the present-day press has escaped notice. The election campaign revealed, however, what has been evident for some time, that newspaper publishing has become one of the biggest of big businesses, that it is being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, that the publishers are aligned with big business on every issue of social welfare, and that like big business men they will not hesitate to stoop to anything to retain their vested interests and to reap greater profits—vilification, distortion of news, and silence, about the activities of the candidates they oppose.

It may be asked: why, if newspapers are represented as so powerful, did they have so little influence on the voters? Or conversely, why, if the voters have such uncommon sense, do they read newspapers whose judgments they do not respect? People have to read whatever newspapers are available for news, even though they may not agree with the editorial policy of the papers they read. And because publishing is a big business, the average man has no voice in its policies. If freedom of the press is to be maintained, groups of people will have to realize that they must publish their own papers cooperatively, with ownership lodged in as broad a basis

as possible. The Jewish *Forward,* for example, has been published for many years by an association whose membership runs into the tens of thousands; and there is no reason why other groups cannot issue their own newspapers in similar fashion. Failing that, the newspaper men themselves should form guilds and publish their own papers. Most of these journalists were in the peculiar position, in the last campaign, of having to sing the praises of Landon and of writing all sorts of misleading propaganda about Roosevelt, despite their personal views. They worked for publishers who were all on Landon's side, and who told the men who worked for them exactly what to write.

The chief reason why the press had so little influence on public opinion (at least during the campaign) was the greater appeal and the greater effectiveness of the radio. It was because Roosevelt had access to the radio that he was able to get his messages across, despite a hostile press. And Roosevelt is an artist of the first rank when it comes to speaking over the radio. If the radio has become of such importance in the life of the people, it becomes imperative, if we are to save democracy, to keep the air free. Numerous attempts were made during the last campaign to keep Browder and other minority candidates off the air. A commission under a less scrupulous government, and not so eager to permit minority groups freedom of expression, could have easily found means of curbing the Browders and keeping them off the air. Under present conditions a great deal is left to the discretion of individual stations, and many cases of discrimination against minority and radical speeches have been reported. We should see to it that the powers of the Federal Communications Commission are so implemented that it will be able to compel the radio stations, under threat of nullification of their permits, to give time on the air to all groups. If federal regulation will not keep the air free, the only solution will be federal ownership of the radio. Great Britain and other countries have experimented successfully with national ownership, and there is no reason why it cannot work in the United States as well.

If we are to make the United States safe for democracy, we must keep the instruments of democracy free and accessible to all the people.

Appreciating Our Jewish Musicians

A RECENT dispatch from Berlin revealed that the Jewish Community of that city had extended an invitation to Jacob Weinberg, now resident in New York City, to come to Germany to compose synagogue choral music. This invitation came as a result of the tremendous success that Mr. Weinberg's Friday Evening Service enjoyed when presented on October 24 to a capacity audience in the largest synagogue in Berlin.

Are we to infer from this incident that Jews will continue to deal shabbily and shamefully with their creative artists so long as they are permitted to attend "Aryan" theatres and concert halls? This seems to be the only logical inference possible, for Jacob Weinberg has for eight years resided in the largest and most influential Jewish community in the world, and has suffered from the most humiliating sort of obscurity. His secular compositions have been published by reputable establishments, and have been acclaimed by the critics. His Jewish compositions have been published at his own expense, for the most part, and have been produced only through his own initiative, and invariably, at a financial loss to himself.

Mr. Weinberg's vicissitudes in the United States have been experienced by numerous other Jewish composers and interpreters. Saminsky, Binder, Achron, Jacoby, Beimel, Pimsleur, Efros and others devote themselves to creating musical art that is expressive of the noblest aspects of the Jewish spirit—and the Jews of this land are hardly familiar with their names. Jewish music is confined almost exclusively to the Reformist congregations which

have introduced the organ into their services; but their services are so fixed and rigid, and their leaders so uninterested in exploring the possibilities of new music that Jewish composers are given little if no incentive to add to the literature of liturgical music.

At present only one organization exists which realizes the enriching value and the creative possibilities of Jewish music. That organization is Mailamm, the American Palestine Music Association. Chapters of Mailamm function in New York, Los Angeles, and in one or two other smaller cities. Yet, despite their valiant efforts to interest Jews in listening to programs of Jewish music and in helping to support the cultivation of Jewish musical activity in Palestine, Mailamm's membership is extremely limited, and most Jews are not even aware that such an organization exists.

Those who have attended some of Mailamm's concerts have been impressed with one significant truth, and Jews interested in the reconstruction of Jewish life must learn to realize its value; namely, that the experience of a moving and compelling musical rendition accomplishes more toward arousing a meaningful Jewish consciousness than all the arguments of all the Jewish orators combined. This is true equally of an esthetically authentic Jewish picture, or dance or dramatic performance. More than once have we emphasized the thought that the worthwhileness of being a Jew can be realized only through the exalting experience of Jewish art at its best, rarely through the intellectual conviction that comes from the most cogent arguments.

If American Jewry continues to treat its composers and artists in the way they have done thus far, these gifted men and women will bestow their talents on other civilizations, and American Jewry will earn their justifiable resentment. If that happens, Jews sincerely devoted to Jewish life will be deprived of their most powerful weapons in their struggle against assimilation. We certainly hope that the Jews of this country will awaken to their responsibility toward Jewish musicians, and not wait until, God forbid, the fate of German Jewry overtakes them.

Hadassah's Opportunity

THE magnificent strength and the sterling efficiency of Hadassah had a thoroughly stimulating effect upon those who attended the recent Philadelphia convention, and upon thousands of enthusiastic sympathizers. If Hadassah with its 52,000 members had done nothing else (and its achievements are legion), it would have accomplished a wonderful job in scotching, once and for all, the myth that women cannot be entrusted with big and important undertakings.

Hadassah is to be congratulated, however, not only for its record of work done in the past; its resolutions for the future are equally worthy of high commendation. During the coming year, Hadassah proposes to expand its educational program in the United States. A special budget has been adopted for the purpose, and it seems that the organization has made up its collective mind that Palestine, indispensable as it is for the future of Judaism in the world, should not be the sole object of its preoccupation. Hadassah abjures the notion that its work is philanthropic, and it rightly draws the necessary implication from that attitude. Philanthropy may be identified as that type of activity in which one gives and the other receives. Philanthropy always presupposes a benefactor and beneficiary. Creative activity, on the other hand, enriches him who receives as well as him who gives. If Hadassah's work is to be creative it must enrich not only the health institutions of Palestine, but the lives of American Jewish women, "culturally and spiritually."

Hence, Hadassah's golden opportunity. Hadassah, through its enlarged educational program, now has the power to impress upon a multitude of American Jewish women the value of Jewish living and Jewish learning. It can exert a tremendous influence over a whole generation of

women who have already developed a loyalty (and what a loyalty!) to the organization that makes for a resuscitated Jewish life in Palestine. One or two suggestions, however, ought to be made, we think, concerning the carrying out of this new program. First, the resolution that calls for cooperation with existing educational forces should not be permitted to remain a mere pious utterance. Too often do sincere organizations resolve to enter upon educational work and proceed as though they were pioneers in the field. We hope that Hadassah will not forget that adult Jewish education is being attempted by synagogues, community centers, philanthropic groups, etc. Insofar as it is possible, amalgamation of forces should be sought. If Hadassah will realize its own hopes in this regard it will contribute a mighty blow to the spirit of individualism which pervades most Jewish communities.

Secondly, Hadassah should never permit the implications of adult Jewish education to be forgotten. The rising generation will be ignorant of Jewish life or intelligently devoted to it, depending upon the extent to which adult indifference can be battered down. If Hadassah succeeds in making Jewish education "fashionable," it should not stop at that point. It should capitalize upon a renewed adult interest to advance the cause of elementary Jewish education. If Hadassah is serious in its resolution to assume responsibility for Jewish life in the United States, it cannot ignore, ultimately, its share of responsibility for the education of the Jewish child.

We are confident that Hadassah will be successful in its newer venture as it has been in everything it has thus far undertaken.

On Raising The Status of The Rabbinate

IN its last issue, *The Reconstructionist* published an article which revealed the lowered prestige and weakened morale of the rabbinate in modern times. The article traced the cause of this condition to two contributing factors. One of these is the loss of interest in the Torah tradition, since it is no longer the only cultural tradition of modern Jews; the other is the break-up of the Jewish community, the *Keneset Yisrael,* into an agglomeration of quasi-independent congregational units. In consequence of this change, the status of the rabbi has been transformed from that of the official head of a local community to that of an employe of a congregation which is essentially a private corporation however important may be the services that it renders to the public. The article accordingly recommended, first, a new type of rabbinic training that should enable the rabbi to recreate interest in and knowledge of the Torah tradition, and, secondly, the reorganization of Jewish life on a communal rather than purely congregational basis. This is a long-range program that is sound and represents a clear implication of our Reconstructionist point of view.

But the need for a vigorous religious leadership is so urgent that we cannot be content with outlining a long-range program which, to the practical and impatient layman, may appear as mere *hilketa limeshiha,* "legislation for the millennium." We must ask ourselves what can be done at the present time to make the rabbinate a safe career for men of intellectual capacity and personal integrity. We must seek measures to insure the rabbi a degree of economic independence and security such as he must have, if he is to perform the function of religious leadership even before we can effect that radical reorganization of our communal life which is the goal of our Reconstructionist efforts.

For one thing, the rabbi must be protected against the loss of his position for reasons irrelevant to the faithful and efficient discharge of his duties as religious leader of the congregation. It should be made the rule that, after a rabbi has demonstrated his qualification for leading a congregation over a period of one or two years, he should not be subject to

removal or threat of removal without specific charges being brought against him and without his being given a chance to answer them before a disinterested body. Such charges would have to prove negligence or incompetence in the discharge of the duties proper to a rabbi, namely the teaching and preaching of Jewish religion and the direction of the specifically religious and cultural activities of the congregation; or else they would have to prove moral turpitude or a deviation from the religious principles of the congregation which were clearly understood and accepted by the rabbi at the time of his taking the position. The responsibility for getting congregations to adopt this policy and for creating the instrumentalities necessary to give it effect should devolve on our national religious organizations such as the United Synagogue of America, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations.

But not only must congregations be more deliberate when demanding the termination of a rabbi's services; they must also be more deliberate in their method of selecting a rabbi. It is a common practice to select a rabbi by a process that is virtually an oratorical contest except that it is not conducted as fairly as such contests usually are. For every oratorical contest is governed by rules of which the contestants are informed in advance and which are equally applied to all of them, but rabbis are chosen on the basis of trial sermons, each candidate preaching on a different day to an audience that is not constituted of the same individuals, and the choice is influenced by personal wire-pulling, competitive bidding and any number of other considerations irrelevant to the qualifications of the candidate for the work he is expected to perform.

A proper procedure would require that the congregation seeking a rabbi should apply to the committee in charge of placement of rabbis of the congregational union with which it is affiliated. The committee would then, after due deliberation, select and recommend to the congregation a rabbi who is in accord with its religious principles, qualified to perform the services required of him and willing to accept the position on the terms offered. Every opportunity should be given to the representatives of the congregation to inquire into the past career of the rabbi and into his reputation for scholarship and character. A meeting of the applicant with the governing board of the congregation might then be arranged at which the problems of the congregation might be discussed in a manner that would enable those present to form their impression of those imponderable elements of the applicant's personality which determine, to no small extent, the likelihood of his success as leader. The preaching of a sermon may be required as a further method of enabling the congregation to judge the applicant's personal qualifications, but this must not be the sole or even the principal method.

To what extent the above suggestions are feasible can be demonstrated only by experiment. At all events, they are not exhaustive of what can be done to raise the status of the rabbinate even in the present chaotic state of Jewish communal life. But they are offered here in the hope that they may stimulate responsible laymen to give thought to the problem and contribute practically to its solution. The lay leaders of our national religious organizations, in particular, should regard the need for raising the status of the rabbinate as a challenge to their leadership.

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Biro-Bidjan and The Jewish Future

By Robert Gordis

I

In a characteristic essay, Charles Lamb protested against the fallacy of the popular doctrine that "one must not look a gift-horse in the mouth." No better illustration, however, of the tenacity of the proverb is to be found than in the varying reactions aroused by the Biro-Bidjan project. The friends of the Jewish autonomous region in Siberia feel that it would be insulting the generosity of the Soviet Government to scrutinize the grant too carefully. Its enemies are so certain in advance that the gift is a broken-down nag, that they refuse to waste time in dental examination.

It is obvious that both these points of view are indefensible. The tragic situation of the Jewish people today makes it urgently necessary to discover new centers for Jewish life. It would be the rankest folly to refuse to consider the Biro-Bidjan proposal on its merits. Yet lamentable as is the Jewish status, we are not relieved of the obligation to use our critical faculties in evaluating the qualities and defects of Biro-Bidjan.

There is no need to retrace the melancholy geography of the modern Jew. Within the borders of Germany, Poland, Austria, Hungary, the Baltic States, and Roumania, live six million men, women, and children, whose lives are in actual or potential peril. The salvaging of these lives is the most pressing problem, as it is the most difficult, facing world Jewry. While temporary relief is absolutely necessary, only large scale emigration can work any permanent improvement in their lot. Hence the proclamation by the Soviet Government on May 7, 1934 of Biro-Bidjan as a Jewish autonomous territory, with the promise of the creation of a Jewish republic in the future, was an event of the greatest significance. It was an act of signal friendship to the Jewish people by a great Power, while the menace of Nazism was everywhere in the ascendancy.

Subsequently, it was announced that several thousand non-Russian Jews, coming from Lithuania, Poland and elsewhere, would be admitted, and given land free, together with a house, furniture, and other living necessities, that would be repaid out of future earnings. The only expense connected with the settlement of a non-Russian Jewish family in Biro-Bidjan is $350, of which $150 goes for transportation to the Russian border and $200 is turned over to the Soviet Government for the remainder of the trip. As a result, committees for the settlement of Jews in Biro-Bidjan have been formed in America and elsewhere. The first fifty non-Russian families have already been sent to the Soviet Union under the sponsorship of these committees. The American Committee has recently inaugurated a campaign for $500,000 to settle a thousand European Jewish families in Biro-Bidjan. The project has grown beyond the discussion stage.

II

Biro-Bidjan, however, has aroused opposition among considerable sections of Jews on a variety of grounds. Biro-Bidjan is separated from Manchuria only by the Amur River. It is claimed that it would therefore be exposed to attack when the inevitable Russo-Japanese war breaks out. At once, expert testimony was advanced to prove that Biro-Bidjan was as safe as Switzerland in the World War; no one said "Belgium."

Expert testimony is notoriously accommodating to its sponsors, but an inexpert glance at the map makes it clear that in the event of an invasion, it would be very difficult for the Japanese to avoid attacking Biro-Bidjan. Nonetheless, Biro-Bidjan would be an improvement for

thousands of Jews in Poland and Lithuania. For East-European Jewry is not only menaced by the equally likely danger of a Nazi war in the near future, but is exposed to the tragic reality of starvation and pogrom in the present.

Moreover, the settlement of Siberia has been a problem with which the Czarist regime had wrestled unsuccessfully for years. If Siberia is to remain Russian, it requires more than scattered white settlements on one side of the Amur with millions of Manchurians and Japanese on the other. This is undoubtedly a contributory factor in the Soviet promulgation of the Jewish territory in Biro-Bidjan. Nevertheless this danger does not suffice to damn the project. That the Soviet Government wishes to utilize the Jewish settlement to build up its Eastern frontier, is no more reprehensible than the British Government's issuance of the Balfour Declaration, in order to win Jewish support in the World War, and buttress its position near the Suez Canal, the life-line of the Empire.

Opponents also assert that Biro-Bidjan has climatic disadvantages. A large part of the country is swampy, and infested with mosquitoes, and the summer months are often marred by heavy floods. As a result of these and other practical difficulties, large numbers of immigrants left Biro-Bidjan during the early years of its history. Thus the Five-Year Plan for 1928-1932 counted on the settlement of nine thousand families, while in fact no more than three thousand came to the territory, and many of these left after a few months. Here, too, apologists of Biro-Bidjan have often denied the facts or minimized the difficulties, while opponents have exaggerated them. The truth, however, is that the Soviet Government is spending large sums of money on drainage, and that most of these problems can be solved. Pioneering is always hazardous, as the Pilgrim settlers in America and the haluzim in Palestine discovered. Colonists in a new country always encounter obstacles in the rigors of a new climate, and often succumb to them, until settlements are firmly established. Biro-Bidjan is somewhat less than Paradise, but it is a good deal better than the alternative.

Biro-Bidjan has also been opposed by groups of Zionists, who feel that it would compete with the upbuilding of Palestine. Though this point of view has some element of truth, as we shall see presently, it scarcely justifies a sweeping condemnation of the proposal. Palestine has outstripped the most optimistic hopes of Zionists in absorbing four hundred thousand Jews in so short a period, but there are literally millions of Jews who require a refuge, who cannot go there; some of them may find shelter in Biro-Bidjan. They deserve food and shelter, their children are worthy of life and laughter, no less than the fortunate ones who can enter Palestine.

These objections call attention to some genuine physical difficulties that inhere in the Biro-Bidjan project, which will undoubtedly take their toll of human lives. The success of the enterprise, however, does not depend on the absence of obstacles, but on the capacity to overcome them. The crux of the problem is not physical, but psychological.

III

The practical difficulties of the Jewish autonomous republic-to-be are not insuperable, as we have seen. Nevertheless, Biro-Bidjan does suffer from some basic limitations that cannot easily be transcended. These must now engage our attention.

Biro-Bidjan can unquestionably serve as a physical refuge for individual Jews, who are now exposed to persecution and economic privation. It *cannot,* however, as proponents frequently assert, *become a homeland for the Jewish people and a center of Jewish culture,* unless an inconceivable *volte-face* takes place in the current ideology of Communism. It is a well-known fact that in Soviet Russia all the great historic forms of Jewish culture are forbidden or ridiculed out of existence. Hebrew is the only language that may not be taught to Jewish children in Russia

today, and even its scientific investigation by adults is looked upon with suspicion. When a Jewish scholar in Leningrad wrote an essay on Semitic philology, he was suspected of counter-revolutionary leanings. Zionism still remains a major political crime, punishable by exile to Siberia. How seriously Jewish communists take their hostility to Zionism is borne out by the unsavory role they have played in fomenting the Arab riots in Palestine, and the support these tactics have won from communists everywhere.

While the Jewish religion is theoretically free from persecution, in practice it is subjected to the gravest penalty—it is condemned to death in the next generation. It may not be taught in any children's school, and is exposed to a ceaseless barrage of atheistic propaganda, which is encouraged by the Soviet authorities. Jewish history is largely blotted out and what remains is distorted beyond recognition. Moses is exhibited as a charlatan and upholder of privilege, the Prophets are decried as fantastic dreamers, and Maimonides is dismissed as a bourgeois theologian. The vast and magnificent Hebrew literature of three millennia is non-existent; and the People of the Book produced nothing of consequence until sixty years ago, in the writing of Mendele Mocher S'forim, Sholem Aleichem and I. L. Peretz. Since this attitude is universal, nay obligatory, upon Jewish communists throughout the Soviet Union, Biro-Bidjan cannot be expected to become a Hebrew cultural center.

This is usually granted without much controversy, but it is maintained that Biro-Bidjan will prove a Yiddish cultural homeland instead. The Soviet Government has done handsomely in stimulating Yiddish culture throughout the Union. In the Crimea and the Ukraine, Yiddish is an official language in the courts, the schools, and the government offices. The Yiddish school system from the primary to the collegiate division, the theatres, and the scientific institutes are all subventioned by the Soviet Government. These activities on behalf of Jewish culture are paralleled by a genuinely favorable attitude on the part of the Soviet leaders. Thus Mikhail Kalinin, the President of the Soviet Union, has laid down his conception of the Jewish state as follows: "In the Soviet Union there are about three million Jews, but thus far there has been no Jewish state unit. The establishment of a Jewish autonomous territory is creating a sound foundation for the Jewish nationality. As a result of the establishment of a Jewish autonomous territory, the Jewish people will become consolidated and acquire all the attributes of a nation. The creation of this autonomous territory will give a new impetus to the blossoming of Jewish culture. Personally, I believe that in about ten years hence, Biro-Bidjan will be the cultural center of the Jewish masses."

Nevertheless, in spite of the encouragement and assistance of the Soviet Government, Biro-Bidjan is not likely to prove a Yiddish cultural center. The support of Soviet officials is not enough to create a Jewish homeland; it requires the enthusiastic devotion and self-sacrifice of the Jews themselves. That is unfortunately lacking completely among the Jewish communists, who carry on a ceaseless propaganda in the Yiddish press to convince their readers that "We build not a refuge for the wandering Jew, not a national homeland for the *galut* nation, but are enriching the international fatherland of the international proletariat." (*Emes,* Dec. 18, 1934). This is no new phenomenon—the Soviet President Kalinin sees the value of Jewish culture and nationality, but the Jews themselves must prove themselves more Catholic than the Pope. The story is making the rounds that when Stalin, himself a non-Jew, addressed a gathering of leading Jewish communists and saw how coolly they reacted to his enthusiastic vision of a Jewish national center, he exclaimed: "I see that I am the only Jew among you!"

As a result of this assimilationist point of view of the Jewish communists, the body politic of Russian Jewry is rapidly disintegrating. In the Ukraine, where

Yiddish is an official language, many all-Jewish collectives keep their records and reports in Ukrainian, and have given up Yiddish in their conversation and their reading. In general, Jews prove to be among the most perfervid Ukrainian patriots. It has been plausibly suggested that one of the reasons that Soviet policy favors a Jewish national territory, is to win the Jews away from Ukrainian nationalism, which still possesses strong separatist and anti-Russian tendencies. Everywhere assimilation is proceeding at a terrific pace. Though the government supports Yiddish schools, Jewish children are sent to Russian schools in increasing numbers. In Russia, Jews are crowding into the intellectual classes. Two hundred and forty out of the seven hundred delegates of the All-Russian Writers' Congress were Jews, but only eight used Yiddish as their medium. The circulation of the communist Yiddish press is steadily declining and Yiddish cultural workers feel that their work is superfluous and useless.

The Yiddish communists have destroyed the Jewish national spirit, uprooted the sense of world-wide Jewish brotherhood, and extirpated the dynamic force of the Jewish religion. Now they are discovering that their Jewish culture has no attraction and no staying power. Whether or not they are sincere in their regrets at the decay of Yiddish, the fact remains that the communist colonists in Biro-Bidjan do not possess sufficient Jewish loyalty to establish even Yiddish culture on a firm basis for coming generations. Hence the only possibility of Biro-Bidjan's becoming a Yiddish cultural center lies in the increase of non-Soviet Jews in the territory, in whom the old Jewish group loyalities are not yet dead. It is, however, highly problematical whether they and their children will be able to withstand the dominant assimilationist tendencies, especially since would-be immigrants are being selected on a basis of "suitability," which undoubtedly includes conformity to the communist ideology.

This objection to Biro-Bidjan, on the ground that it cannot serve as a Jewish cultural center, may appear abstract and secondary. Actually it is the root of the problem. Biro-Bidjan is still undeveloped, not because of the Japanese peril or the climatic conditions, but because the pioneering spirit was lacking. The Jews in Russia today are well-treated, discrimination is virtually non-existent, and all roads to advancement are open to them. Over 80 percent of the Russian Jews are farmers, workers, and government employes. They see no reason to abandon their relatively safe positions to become pioneers in far-off Siberia, eight days' distance from the Russian capital. Thus the press recently carried the news that the small quotas of students required for the various technical schools in Biro-Bidjan have been only half filled by Jews in the Ukraine and other parts of Russia. A man will become a pioneer for a cause, but the cause of a Jewish state, or a center for Jewish culture means little or nothing to the rapidly assimilating Jews of the Soviet Union. English merchants came across the Atlantic in search of religious freedom; a Catholic lord left England and came to America on the same mission; Jews throughout the world throng to Palestine to lay the foundations of a Jewish homeland. But Biro-Bidjan is unable to arouse the enthusiasm of Russian Jews because neither religion, nor nationality, nor Jewish culture answers to any deep necessity of their souls. Hence after all the government encouragement and support, Biro-Bidjan has only twenty thousand Jews, while Palestine has twenty times that number in spite of difficulties with the Arabs and the hindrances created either deliberately or stupidly by the British authorities. It seems that non-Russian Jews are the only ray of hope for the Soviet Jewish republic, in the physical as well as the cultural sense.

IV

In sum, it does not seem that Biro-Bidjan can serve the spiritual needs of the Jewish people, whether we interpret them in terms of Jewish tradition in its totality, or the segment which is Yiddish culture.

It is as a physical refuge that Biro-Bidjan holds out some promise for the tortured Jews of Eastern and Central Europe. Attempts are being made today to colonize Jews in Ecuador, Mexico, and South Africa, that they may be safe from physical attack. Biro-Bidjan offers at least a like opportunity. With the sincere and energetic assistance given the project by the Soviet Government, it should be possible to overcome the major physical obstacles. The real test of the success of Biro-Bidjan will lie in the number of foreign Jews who settle in the territory. It is for them alone that it can be a refuge, and in turn they alone offer hope for the project as a whole.

What shall be the attitude of American Jewry to Biro-Bidjan? It is clear that every Jew who is seriously concerned with the welfare of his people, cannot but echo the fair and understanding words of Professor Einstein: "I feel impelled to recognize thankfully that Biro-Bidjan is of great significance for a part of the Jewish people, and I appreciate that the furthering of the colony by the Russian Government is a generous help to them." Biro-Bidjan has a right to the sympathetic understanding of every Jew.

In the practical sphere, however, all those who have been inspired by the national and cultural rebirth of Palestine cannot be asked to weaken or divide their efforts on behalf of the Jewish homeland. Palestine righly commands every iota of strength they possess in the heroic struggle to maintain and extend Jewish achievement in Palestine. The large number of Jews, however, who, for whatever reason, have not been won to the Zionist ideal, and yet declare themselves devoted to their people, have an ineluctable duty to perform. Biro-Bidjan gives them the opportunity to render practical assistance in the creation of a haven of refuge for their sorely afflicted brothers. In this difficult hour, there is work enough for all who seek to serve the Jewish cause in sincerity and truth.

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Hasidism To The Rescue

By Joshua Starr

THE hasidic way of life is, for all its remoteness from us, no longer a closed book for the present generation of neo-*mitnagdim*. Schechter's classic essay has been widely read, Anski's *Dybbuk* was a sensation on the American stage, and anthologies of hasidic tales have been added to the rapidly growing list of Judaica in English. As for those who were privileged to supplement their education with readings in modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, they could scarcely have overlooked the wonderful bits of that strange life immortalized in the works of Steinberg, Peretz, and Asch. Who will forget Jacob Steinberg's portrait of that *hasid* who basked in the afterglow of the Sabbath throughout the three following days each week, and who commenced his preparations for the ensuing rest-day on Wednesday evening, thus leaving him but one profane humdrum day weekly? No doubt it was an escape from reality that this joyous Sabbath functioned in the lives of these east European *luftmenschen,* yet its significance in the history of Jewish religious experience is not negated by such a judgment. That significance, moreover, cannot be adequately determined on the basis of the artistic expressions of the hasidic life by writers such as those which have been mentioned; it falls properly in the field of the historical investigator who is in a position to explore both the movement itself as well as the material and cultural environment in which it had its

being. This, in general terms, is the task which has now been attempted in Jacob S. Minkin's *The Romance of Hasidism.**

Viewing Hasidism as a development in the direct line of age-old mysticism, the author leads up to his subject proper by searching out the mystic strains in our ancient and medieval literatures, and indicating how this heritage culminated in the Kabbalah and in that world's illusion, Shabbetai Zebi of Symrna. Not many decades thereafter, into the brooding, unlovely Jewish atmosphere of Podolia (southeastern Poland), far from the renowned Yeshobot of Amsterdam, Vilna, or Salonika, two and a quarter centuries ago there was born a child named Israel, the *Besht* that was to be. To compensate for the dearth of fact concerning his life tradition has woven legend after legend about him. That, as Minkin correctly senses, is a tribute to the man's uncanny influence on his contemporaries, and there can be no doubt that the spontaneous, unlettered religious experience to which Israel summoned the forgotten village Jew was a radical departure from the prevailing aristocratic criteria and discipline. But the author's evaluation goes rather further: "Perhaps nowhere in history has a man taken such a long stride forward and carried almost a whole people with him." One wonders how many readers will consider such enthusiasm justified.

The bulk of this book is devoted to biographico-legendary sketches of the leaders of the movement: Dob Baer, preacher and organizer; Jacob Joseph, fighting critic and writer; Levi Yitzhok, the people's friend and their advocate before God; Shneur Zalman, the philosopher, Nahman of Bratzlav, raconteur and egotist. These chapters are followed by an account of the controversies between the *hasidim* and their opponents which rocked east European Jewish life throughout the late eighteenth and the greater part of the nineteenth centuries. The twenty pages describing the "Life of a Hasid" are very well done, and the concluding chapter, while essentially concerned with the decline of the movement, ends on a rather hopeful note; both in the land of Martin Buber and on the *Besht's* native soil there are signs that the fate of Hasidism is not yet sealed.

One cannot read very far into the pages of this learned book without sensing that there is something objectionable in the manner in which the author dispatches his shafts of ill-chosen phrases. On the very first page we learn, for example, that Babylon was "the home where Rabbinism was perfected;" what is meant is, of course, simply that Rabbinic Judaism flourished there to a high degree and exerted a powerful influence on the communities located in other countries. Then in the following chapter we hear of Polish Jewry's "widening of their intellectual horizon" toward the end of the seventeenth century. We read ahead eagerly, but alas, those words are used by Minkin to indicate that an intensified study of the Talmud — praiseworthy enough, indeed, — made its appearance. Specimens such as "gets to hear" and "empire of Hasidimdom" greet the eye frequently enough to annoy, not to say alienate, the reader, and the author's profligate use of synonyms is exemplified by the following selections culled from one brief paragraph: "atmosphere and temperament," "types and characters," "gross and vulgar, coarse and repellent," "sham in their religion, hypocrisy in their piety, and worldliness in their professed spirituality," "saints and teachers, leaders and officials," "adored and deified, worshiped, fed and fattened from the toil and labor." It requires a conscious effort to realize that the book before one has worthwhile content, despite its bloated style.

Minkin's most serious offense, however, is in his appraisal of mysticism and of its embodiment in the movement founded by the *Besht*. Believe it or not—"the world's greatest classic of mysticism" is the Bible! Again, what writing has exercised "the greatest influence on the Jewish mind since the creation of the Talmud?" Not Maimonides' *Guide* nor Halevi's *Kuzari,*

*The Macmillan Co., N. Y., 1935.

but the *Sefer Yesirah!* As for Hasidism, it did not merely succeed in calling a large Jewish population back to God's world of nature, or in counteracting the over-emphasis on narrow bookish values. The author prefers instead to claim that the *Besht* "saved religion," that Nahman of Bratzlav was "a flaming (sic) crusader (!) in a generation that was chained to dead and enslaving traditions," and that the exaltede motional mood termed *hitlahabut* "saves religion from stagnating into cold formality." To think that less than two centuries ago the majority of the Jews of the world were leading a life that was spiritually dead, and that all scholars are blind to the phenomenon, save one!

It is a pity that Minkin went to such lengths to master his subject and then permitted a sophomoric enthusiasm to vitiate his presentation. A scholar and writer who can depict the economic role of the *zaddik* and his *shtibel* as realistically as Minkin does, should have been more self-critical. Certainly he cannot have deluded himself into believing, for example, concerning one Rabbi Levi Yitzhok that "the world has rewarded him with its acclaim." And surely he knows Judaism well enough to realize that the significance of Hasidism is not unquestionably greater than that of every other movement, say Zionism. As for the place of Hasidism in contemporary life, it seems fairly clear that despite its opposition to the *mitnagdim,* it is a current within traditional Judaism, and that its survival or disappearance is bound up with that of traditionalism. Indeed, considering how dependent the hasidic life is on auto-suggestion and on a general naivete, it would seem that the tendencies of the modern world are, if anything, more hostile to it.

No one who would know the life of the Jewish spirit in the past two centuries can afford to be unsympathetic to Hasidism. Yet appreciation untempered by perspective and restraint is not becoming to any writer of prose. The movement initiated by the *Besht* is fully worthy of historical, psychological and literary treatment. Whatever romance its career harbors will emerge without the over-appraisal of its contribution toward averting the petrifaction of the Jewish religion.

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Realities of Jewish Life*

From Berlin comes the news of a remarkable development in the life of German Jewry. It is reported that for want of theatres in which to present their "ghetto performances," the German Jews are turning to the use of synagogues as theatres. The plan is to be tried this month as an experiment by the Berlin Jewish Community with the Biblical drama, "The Letter of Uriah," written by Rabbi Emil Bernhard Cohn, who was recently held under arrest by the Gestapo, secret state police. The provincial units of the Jewish Culture League, the organization set up to supervise ghetto art, culture and entertainment, began to look to the synagogues when they found Aryan theatre owners refusing to rent houses for their productions. If the experiment succeeds, Jews in small communities, where now there is virtually no Jewish entertainment, will have the novel experience of witnessing their plays in the same houses where they worship. I do not think the synagogues in Germany will suffer much from their forced connection with the Jewish drama. In the Middle Ages the drama was closely connected with the church. It was then that the church was a living institution. Maybe the synagogue

* Readers are invited to send in items of interest.

can be revived by the infusion of some dramatic blood into its hardened arteries.

The Day, New York City.

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Those who believe that Judaism is on the downgrade in Soviet Russia will be amazed to learn that Kiev, Russia, is one of the many places to which books and tracts published by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations are sent. Other distant points to which the Union's literature goes are Shanghai, San Juan, Porto Rico, Tokio, Caracas, Venezuela, Sitka, Alaska, Honolulu and New Delhi, India.

—*Jewish Ledger,* Springfield, Mass.

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The National Conference of Jews and Christians announced yesterday that six honorary vice-presidents of the Freethinkers Association had caused their names to be removed from the roster of the organization because of an appeal to Jews by Joseph Lewis, its president, to renounce their "antiquated creed."

The appeal, denouncing the Yom Kippur as "the most degrading and humiliating day in all the superstitious annals of religion," brought a protest from Rabbi Leo M. Franklin of Congregation Beth El, Detroit. The following were listed as sympathizing with the protest: Herbert Asbury, Harry Elmer Barnes, Clarence E. Darrow, Rupert Hughes, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Chauncey D. Leake. William J. Fielding was quoted as supporting Mr. Lewis, while two other honorary vice-presidents made no response.

Mr. Lewis was not reached for comment.

—New York *Times,*
Tuesday, Oct. 28, 1936.

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According to a report in the Jewish daily *Biro-Bidjan Shteren,* there will be a very important addition made to the cultural institutions of Biro-Bidjan, namely, there will be transported to the Jewish Autonomous Territory the most famous Jewish library in the U.S.S.R., which is at present a section of the Ukrainian Academy of Science in Kiev.

A special delegation left Biro-Bidjan for Kiev to transport the library, which bears the name of the famous Jewish writer, Mendele Mocher S'forim.

—*Nailebn,* Oct. 1936.

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Dr. Stephen S. Wise was criticized at one of the sessions of the Jewish World Congress by Rabbi Brod, the Chief Rabbi-elect of Antwerp, for having opened the Congress with the benediction of "Sheheyanu." "It is customary to pronounce that benediction," said the rabbi, "only over a new fruit that is ripe. The Congress, however, is only beginning to grow."

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